

A Caring Teacher: explorations into primary school teachers' professional identity and ethic of care

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ABSTRACT *This article explores primary school teachers' conceptions of caring within teaching and discusses the relevance of an ethic of care for teaching. Thirty-two Swiss and English primary school teachers participated in this exploratory study. The methodology included semi-structured interviews as well as image-based approaches employing photographs and drawings. Caring within teaching can be understood in a range of ways: caring as commitment, caring as relatedness, caring as physical care, caring as expressing affection, such as giving a cuddle, caring as parenting and caring as mothering. The author suggests that these definitions of caring within teaching can be placed along a continuum. Caring understood as mothering at one end of this continuum is distinctly associated with traditional Western notions of femininities whereas caring as commitment is non-gender-specific. Caring as relatedness can be linked with the concept of ethic of care, which has been conceptualised as a moral perspective more often held by women. The findings of this study challenge this view, as an ethic of care understood as responsibility for and relatedness to their pupils emerged amongst men as well as women.*

Introduction

A total of 32 teachers, 22 women and 10 men, have been involved in this exploratory study focusing on caring within teaching, and an ethic of care and gender. Teachers were asked to explore issues of caring within teaching: (i) in the context of a semi-structured interview; or (ii) by interpreting photographs of themselves teaching their class; or (iii) by drawing a picture of themselves as teachers and exploring its meaning in a semi-structured interview. The variety of methodological approaches was chosen to enable a wider picture to emerge of the ways teachers negotiate their professional identity. The study was carried out in England and Switzerland, as these two countries vary in the extent to which teaching is a predominantly female profession. Whereas feminisation of primary teaching is above the international average in England and Wales, with 88% of primary and nursery classroom teachers being women (Department for Education and

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Employment [DfEE], 1999), there are comparatively more men teaching in Swiss primary schools, with 73% of primary teachers being female (Stocker *et al.*, 1999). The British teachers included seven trainee teachers towards the end of their training, and 17 teachers working in primary schools, teaching 5–11 year-old pupils. The eight Swiss participants were qualified primary school teachers, working with 6–12 year-olds. The study is exploratory in nature and addresses the following questions. How do teachers conceptualise caring within their teaching? In what ways are interpretations of ‘a caring teacher’ gendered? To what extent are teachers’ ethics of teaching oriented towards an ethic of care and are there differences between women and men in this respect?

Literature Review

The literature review encompasses three areas identified as relevant to caring within primary teaching and its gendered construction: first, research on primary school teachers’ work and the importance of caring; second, the gendered connotations of caring, drawing on a maternal subtext to caring work; and third, the concept of the ethic of care as a moral perspective more typical of women, and its application to teaching.

Caring within Teaching

Research into the subjective views of teachers, for example, that of Nias (1989), has highlighted the importance of personal investment, commitment and relationship for teachers’ work, motivation and satisfaction; primary teaching has been conceptualised as a ‘culture of care’ (Nias, 1999, p. 66). Nias (1999) distinguishes six aspects of the culture of care in primary teaching: care as affectivity, as responsibility for learners, as responsibility for the relationships in the school, as self-sacrifice, as over-conscientiousness and as identity. Her analysis seeks a social-psychological interpretation of the effects of feelings and beliefs on teachers’ identity and practice. Woods (1990, p. 55) found that ‘affective attachment’ is an essential component of being a primary school teacher, and he argues that ‘*in loco parentis*’ is interpreted by primary school teachers as taking on a caring role similar to parental interactions. Primary school teachers have to deal with the tensions between developing strong affective relationships with their pupils, and also having to instruct and control them (Woods, 1990). Teachers at the beginning of their careers often find caring and maintaining order to be problematic opposites (Weinstein, 1998). Prospective primary school teachers, more so than secondary school teachers, give reasons related to caring as motivation for becoming a teacher (Book & Freeman, 1986). The importance given to caring in teaching might be related to gender: women teachers have been found to be more strongly involved in reforms which have emphasised the caring role of teaching (Hubbard & Datnow, 2000). The research mentioned here emphasises the importance of caring for teaching, in particular in primary schools, and has highlighted the question as to whether the emphasis on caring within teaching is stronger for women than men teachers.

Gendered Connotations of Caring

The concept of ‘caring’ is connected with discourses on nature, altruism, ethics and mothering (Klages & Vogt, 1996). Sociobiological theories provide the foundation for a discourse which links human caring to mothering by reference to ‘nature’ and ‘biology’. Lewotin *et al.* (1988) criticise the sociobiological views on caring and define caring as a

social activity which is culturally associated with the female role. Badinter (1991) describes how historically the idea of motherly love emerged, locating bourgeois women as carers of their children. Benhabib (1989) shows how the definition of a caring female nature serves patriarchal power relations: as caring is understood as the woman's natural duty to be performed in the private sphere, women are excluded from participation in the public sphere of politics and culture. The gendered discourse of caring needs to be seen within an analysis of patriarchy, whereby patriarchy is understood as a system of social structures of male domination over women, particularly at the economic level of women's paid and unpaid work (Walby, 1989).

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women entered teaching under the premise that certain aspects of teaching, such as teaching girls or young children, were acceptable for certain women, for example, unmarried women (Oram, 1996; Kaufman *et al.*, 1997; Munro, 1998).

Being an occupation undertaken by both women and men, teaching was ambiguously gendered. It was partly associated with the feminine maternal sphere of the nurturing and upbringing of children. In its claim to full professionalism it could also be seen as masculine, offering a lifelong career after a specific training, intellectual work, public service and some approximation to professional material rewards (Oram, 1996 pp. 8f.).

Because of the association of teaching with women's traditional role as carers for young children, women were expected to be especially suited to primary teaching. Teaching is, to some extent, seen as 'an extension of mothering' (Griffin, 1997, p. 13). Attributes listed for a 'good mother' and for a 'good teacher' have been found to be largely identical (Aspinwall & Drummond, 1989). The class teacher system in primary schools enforces the maternal subtext, as the teachers spend long hours with their schoolchildren and build up close relationships with them; their care often extends beyond the call of duty (Acker, 1995). 'Like mothering, caring for young children in schools is regularly regarded as a natural sphere for women, making monetary incentives or public tributes unnecessary' (Acker, 1999, p. 4). Acker (1999) maintains that such a view of primary school teaching should be challenged. Caring is often associated with low-paid or unpaid work performed by academically less successful working-class women (Skeggs, 1997). Drawing on the gendered conceptions of caring as discussed in this section, it could be expected that caring within teaching also evokes connotations of (female) service, of vocation and being a 'natural teacher' rather than (male) professionalism, expertise and authority.

Ethic of Care, Gender and Teaching

'Ethic of care' has become a term of reference for a number of feminist theorists (Smeyers, 1999). Gilligan (1982) has introduced the concept of ethic of care, drawing on developmental psychology. Gilligan (1995) distinguishes between a feminine and a feminist ethic of care. Ethic of care and ethic of justice should not be understood as essentially gendered, but as a moral orientation; a person is seen as having a tendency to reflect ethics in terms of care or justice or both (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988). Challenging this concept of moral orientation as a personal attribute, Döbert (1995) and Nunner-Winkler (1995) found that the use of one or the other ethical orientation is not a characteristic of a person, but related to the person's involvement with the situation. When participants were more emotionally involved in a situation, they tended to use an ethic of care argumentation, independent of their gender.

The concept of ethic of care as an ethic more prevalent amongst women has been

applied to primary school teaching (Noddings, 1992). Ethic of care can also be interpreted as negative for teaching: the orientation towards ethic of care of many teachers, in particular women primary teachers, has been identified as a factor contributing to destructive feelings of guilt (Hargreaves & Tucker, 1991). The stereotype of a caring primary school teacher being female conflicts with discourses of masculinity. Men are discouraged from choosing primary school teaching (DeCorse & Vogtle, 1997) and the motivation of men teaching young children can be subject to suspicion (Skelton, 1994).

The literature discussed so far suggests a complex interplay between caring/ethic of care and teaching, and caring and gender. The research on which this article is based seeks to explore further how caring is conceptualised within teaching and how these conceptions are gendered, and whether female and male primary teachers differ in their emphasis on caring within teaching.

Methodology

The research is based on different approaches and groups of participants, including teachers at different stages in their careers, to allow a wide range of views to emerge. In total, 32 teachers and trainee teachers in Britain and Switzerland participated, 22 women and 10 men. Because of this limited sample, the exploratory nature of this research needs to be highlighted.

The participants were involved in one of three different approaches, using: (i) semi-structured interviews; or (ii) semi-structured interviews based on photographs; or (iii) drawings followed by a semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interviews covered the following areas: self-understanding as a teacher, professional choice and expectations, understanding of caring within teaching, and views on gender issues in teaching. Fifteen English teachers and seven English trainee teachers participated in this part of the study. The approach using photographs involved a female and a male English primary school teacher. I visited them in their class and took photographs of their interactions with pupils. A few months later, these photographs were used as a focus for interviews, asking which photographs represented most clearly how they see themselves as a teacher, which did not, and which photographs illustrated the caring side of teaching. This approach contributed to an understanding of caring situated within the overall context of teaching. The third approach centred on drawings, a methodology inspired by the work of Mitchell and Weber (Weber & Mitchell, 1996; Mitchell & Weber, 1999). I developed a procedure whereby eight Swiss participants were first asked to draw how they see themselves as teachers, followed by an interview in which they elucidated their drawings. These interviews did not include an explicit question about caring within teaching and therefore both the images and the teachers' explanations can be seen as representations of the teachers' identity and their ethic, which were not influenced by the research theme of caring. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and translations from Swiss-German to English were undertaken by me. The teachers' names have been changed to pseudonyms. The differences in method and context between the three approaches limit comparison. Data analysis for all three approaches was based on the method of systematic analysis of key themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Research Findings

The findings will be discussed in two main sections, 'Professional identity, gender and ethic of care' and 'A caring teacher'. Different methodological approaches contribute in

varying ways to the development of understandings of caring and ethics of care within teaching. In the first section, the relevance of caring within teaching is explored as an aspect of professional identity, based on the findings from the visual and image-based approaches. The teachers' descriptions of 'a caring teacher' in the semi-structured interviews are analysed in the second part of the research findings.

Professional Identity, Gender and Ethic of Care

In this section, I only focus on the findings from the image-based methods as they prove particularly useful to explore issues of professional identity. Teachers revealed much about their understanding and priorities as professionals by discussing images they had produced themselves or which depicted them at work without me making caring the theme of the conversation. By contrast, the teachers who were interviewed without using images were informed of the research interest of caring within teaching from the outset. It should, however, be noted that in the process of the research all data was analysed across all three methods and similar issues surrounding professional identity, gender and ethic of care became apparent.

Identity Discourse: teachers discuss their photographs

As the photographs provided snapshots of the teachers' interactions with their pupils, they offer a representation of some aspects of the teachers' practices in the classroom. The photographs were used as a stimulus to reflect on the participants' self-understanding as a teacher. The two English teachers reacted very differently to the photographs. Miriam elucidates how specific photographs represent how she sees herself as a teacher:

That one ... I like to think that I am helping the children. I am actually helping Daniel there with his work. Daniel is quite a low-ability child so I like to feel that I give him one-to-one attention when he needs it. And the other children are getting on around us, working. I feel I am approachable by the children, [two photographs] are both showing as well that I am approachable. And I am very loving to these children ... they are very loving towards the teachers and you will get hugged from them and I would hate to think that I would push them away. Daniel on [this photograph], he was feeling very poorly on that day and all he wanted really was a hug from his teacher to reassure him.

Whereas Miriam easily related to all the photographs and, on the whole, found they represented how she sees herself as a teacher, David believed there should have been a picture which would show him being strong on discipline:

FF: What then would be pictures or moments I didn't take, how would they look?

David: They would look more like this [pointing at a photograph showing him on the playing field standing in front of the children]. I stand, chalk and talk a lot in front of the classroom ... There is no picture there, I think, that shows me strong on discipline and I do feel I am strong on discipline.

The two passages show a very different approach to identity talk as a primary school teacher: David wanted to see a picture which would illustrate him being strong on discipline, and Miriam in the first place chose to talk about three pictures which show

her helping the children, being approachable and giving them love. These examples seem to support the idea of gender difference in ethics, whereby women emphasise care. However, this would be too hasty an interpretation, as the following excerpts show. Both teachers describe how they deal with disciplining a child:

Miriam: Situation here on [this] picture where Laura has been drawing on the desk if I remember rightly, I wasn't shouting at her and I always try to get down to their level when I am talking to them about any disciplinary matters. I don't like to tower above them, I am trying to get on their level so that they are not intimidated at all; quite a relaxed area out of the sight of anybody else ... I do shout at times, it's got to be done at times, but I do prefer the quiet approach, talking things through with the children.

David: On [this photograph] I am telling a child off, very carefully because I think that child had quite a bit that week so I decided to just kneel down and ask the question, I can't remember what the question was and just talk to him gently so that nobody else could actually hear. ... I just felt at that particular moment with this child all he needed was a quiet word in his ear.

Both teachers are getting down to the same level as the child, are concerned that nobody else should hear, and prefer the quiet approach to reprimanding a child. The first reaction to the photographs, focusing on their view of themselves as teachers, could in these two cases be interpreted as a construction of their professional identity reflecting gender stereotypes—David's emphasis on discipline, Miriam's emphasis on helping. However, the teachers' actions and reflections about disciplining a child are very similar and display an emphasis on care which both share. Drawing on these two cases, it could be concluded that the teacher's construction of professional identity responding to the photographs reveals discourses of femininity and masculinity, whereas the teacher's practice in handling discipline is oriented towards an ethic of care regardless of gender difference.

Relatedness at the Heart of Teaching: teachers discussing their drawings

The eight Swiss primary school teachers asked to draw how they see themselves as teachers came up with images which all emphasise their relationships with the pupils. It is important to note that caring was not explicitly mentioned by the researcher in this approach. The task of drawing oneself as a teacher demanded prioritising, as not all aspects of professional identity could be included in the drawings. Many teachers view their drawings as an expression of their ideal teacher, so, for example, Amanda says, 'I drew the situation how I wish my teaching would be, it is a kind of a vision'.

All the drawings reveal the relevance of the teachers' relationships with their pupils and all teachers talked about how they understood themselves as teachers in relation to their pupils. Two teachers used the abstract symbols of networks and arrows to portray the relationships in their class. Ruth emphasises how important relationships are to her in teaching:

My basic idea is to 'give and receive', which I think is sort of an ideal. ... I drew the two-way arrows ... It's all about relationships ... in the lower primary [6–9 year-old pupils] the relationships are more important than the different school subjects are. ... I transmit more by who I am. My basic principle is that the relationship [with the children] is fundamental to me as a teacher.

Two teachers mentioned the moment of shaking hands at the beginning and end of the day as important for personal contact with every child:

Manuel: ... every day they say hello and goodbye and I expect them to come and shake hands and to make eye contact, and that is how I have contact every day with each child twice, sometimes they want to tell me something then, at other times they don't.

Images of nurturing came up several times, for instance, in Stefanie's metaphor of herself being a gardener, the children depicted as sunflowers. Christina mentioned the high value she places on empathy and how she encourages her pupils to be empathetic. In many accounts an ethic of non-violence and inclusion emerged. Christina seeks 'to respect their [the pupils'] rights and personalities'. Maria develops a vision of inclusiveness as she regards the school as 'a house, I am in the house with the children and every room is open to all of them ... places and opportunities for everyone'.

The two image-based approaches have explored questions of professional identity, in asking the participants how they see themselves as teachers. The findings show how the relationship with the pupils is at the heart of teachers' views of themselves as teachers.

A Caring Teacher

In the semi-structured interviews, 22 English teachers were also asked directly how they would describe a caring teacher. Their answers show an interesting range of understandings. The following categories emerged: caring as commitment; caring as relatedness; caring as physical care; caring expressed by giving a cuddle; caring as parenting; and caring as mothering.

A Caring Teacher is Very Committed

Caring can be used to emphasise the commitment of the teacher. A female trainee teacher, asked to describe a caring teacher, responded as follows:

Sheila: Well, teachers who care about the children, about themselves—how they teach—and about education in general. Caring has something to do with commitment.

Similarly, 'a caring teacher' is described by Sally as teaching the curriculum and providing a happy and secure environment, and by Victoria as somebody who takes their responsibility for children's learning seriously:

Sally: I think a caring teacher is someone who expects a lot from a class and makes sure that is what they do, and that they are covering everything they need to cover ... and also obviously caring in terms of making sure they are happy, that they come to school happy and they go home happy.

Victoria: These children get only one chance at it, they pass through the education system once and it's my job to make sure that I can do the best I can.

For many teachers, caring is integral to primary teaching. Isaac, a trainee teacher, sees it as a prerequisite:

I think, quite simply, if you're going to walk in through the door as a primary teacher, then, for me, being a carer is prerequisite. I think it is integral to the job.

In this inclusive understanding, a caring teacher is a good teacher, as Valerie emphasises: 'I think a good teacher is equal to a caring teacher'. Caring can be understood as commitment to teaching. That teachers should care in such a way represents a very inclusive professional ethos.

Caring and Relatedness

Caring within teaching also means relatedness. Many teachers across the whole sample emphasised the relevance of their relationships with their pupils. A caring teacher is understood to be approachable and interested in the personal situation of each individual child, establishing trust and respect in a caring relationship:

Arthur: A caring teacher—someone who shows interest in the children, not just the work, but what is happening in the playground, at home; sympathetic, again, the children would come and talk to you and approach you.

Philip, who teaches the children of the youngest age group at primary school, argues that in his view caring is fundamental for teaching and learning:

Teachers are as much carers, as much as they need to be aware of learning. I'd see colleagues who do not seem to care as much. The response they get is different, they are not liked by the children or not loved or it is just that they don't have that relationship with the children.

Because of feelings of relatedness to and responsibility for the children, this teacher perceives her work as very demanding:

Tina: It's a feeling as if you have more and more to do all the time. ... depending on how conscientious you are, you do have an awful lot of extra work to do and take the job very seriously, when you care much about the children you tend to worry about them.

In my sample, both women and men emphasised the importance of caring understood as caring about building a good relationship with the pupils. Valerie sees the relationship as crucial to learning, saying that 'if there isn't a good relationship between the teacher and the pupil then they can't learn effectively'. Understood as relatedness, caring is fundamental to primary school teaching, and many teachers place high demands on themselves to meet the ideal of a caring teacher.

Caring as Physical Care

A few teachers interpret caring within teaching in terms of physical care and argue that younger children need more physical caring than older children do. When it comes to care as a concern for physical well-being, caring is clearly seen as gendered:

Mary: I mean, in reception [first year of school, five year-olds] you have to deal with ... the actual sort of physical caring sort of thing ... we have children still having difficulties to go to the toilet ... maybe that sort of side of things just doesn't appeal to men.

Whether caring defined as physical care should be part of teaching is contested:

Lara: We're there to teach them ... I remember when I was in school, if somebody was sick, or somebody didn't feel well, this is years and years ago, it was up to our class teacher to look after her, and it was really interesting to

see my mentor, my teacher, her reaction to children who went green and said, I'm going to be sick, and she would just say, well, go to the toilet, then. And her attitude was: I'm here to teach them, I'm not here to clean up their sick ... if they're not well enough to join in the lesson they're not well enough to be in school.

These conflicting views exist within a context of devaluation of everyday physical care, which is traditionally seen as a task fulfilled by unpaid and non-professional female carers in the family.

A Caring Teacher as a Cuddly Teacher?

Body contact such as giving a hug or putting an arm round the shoulder is generally perceived as an expression of care, as a previous study shows (Vogt, 1997). Some teachers think that younger children often need a cuddle in order to be reassured that the teacher cares for them. Tina differentiates her description of a caring teacher according to the age of the pupils concerned:

In the upper junior [10 and 11 year-old pupils] it would be a teacher who gave the children what they need to pass the exams, you know, who differentiated the work and gave them lots of homework and pull them up and make them much better. At this stage [Tina teaches eight year-old pupils], the children very often need a cuddle ... there is more, you have to give the children perhaps more love and care when they are younger.

For others this would be interpreted negatively, as, for example, by Megan: 'I mean, I'm not really all cuddly and you know, I don't mean caring in the sense of holding their hand all the time'. The opinions of my interviewees ranged from the view that cuddles are all right and needed, to expressing concerns that teachers have to be careful because of potential allegations, to the opinion that teachers should never touch pupils as it would be unprofessional. The acceptance of a cuddle in a teaching situation seems to depend on two determinants: whether the teacher is female or male and whether the teacher is a parent or not.

Arthur: There is a stigma attached to male teachers with little children. And they are very trusting and you have to be very careful. You will say change for PE and they will strip down completely—'come on put your pants back on'—and these sort of things ... and you could put yourself in a very awkward situation and that is why I was happier when I was married and when I had my own children. Because it's perhaps more a father figure.

Valerie: If a child needs a hug, if a child needs a cuddle, if a child needs a hand to hold then you should give it I think that is part of being *in loco parentis*, of being there instead of their parent, part of making them feel secure and making them feel loved and wanted so that they can grow. I know it must be hard with the older children but with the little ones it's much easier and being a woman it's much easier as well. ... a male reception teacher would find it very hard, because they have to be very careful. Even when they are a father, they have to think, because children these days are very aware. And rightly so I think, you should make them aware that there are nice touches and not nice touches, but I think it is easier for a woman not to feel bothered about it, not to feel that it is an issue as with the men.

Many teachers interviewed maintained that male teachers need to be more careful with body contact to avoid allegations of sexual abuse. A trainee teacher who accepted a post where he will be working with young children is worried:

John: I don't know, I feel uncomfortable in society today, I mean, I feel as if parents frown at me. I mean, children in this school, they are very loving, they come and give you a hug ... [*FV:* How do you deal with it then?] It is just making sure you have other people around, never be alone with a child, which is, any teacher should never be alone with a child ... I don't know, it is just making sure that no one could have a doubt about your intentions towards the children. ... I am going into reception. I think is suggested, well, to every teacher is suggested to have a cushion to put on your knee, for any child in distress to sit them on a cushion on your knee rather than have them straight on your knee so that no allegation could come that way.

The more experienced male teachers in the sample had developed their own ways of expressing caring. Skelton's (1994) research found a lack of guidance through school-wide policy discussions for men working with young children. Caring understood as a physical expression, such as with a cuddle, is again very controversially evaluated by the teachers interviewed.

Caring as Parenting

Parenting was mentioned in relation to caring within teaching. It seems that caring provokes associations with being a parent and parenting. Many teachers who are parents emphasised the similarities between teaching and parenting:

Billy: I think being a father helps. ... You had all the upsets and the nitty gritty of everyday life with young children and I think that helps a great deal. I think staff who haven't had children, male or female, they have a different outlook to children as have parents, generally; sometimes it's otherwise. I mean, children change your life definitely, I think it changes your life for the better and it gives you a more relaxed attitude to children.

Others emphasise the different roles and contexts of teachers and parents:

Charles: I would like to believe that me not being a parent doesn't hinder seriously my ability to care for the pupils in my class, but who knows ... I would say that my role as a carer for the child is firmly defined within the context of being in school with the child or in being in that educational environment.

Lara: I mean we're sort of *in loco parentis*, aren't we, when the children are in school? We are responsible for them, but we're not their parents. We're there to teach them. ... I mean you're not their parent, you're not there to wipe their bottoms.

In the interpretation of caring as parenting, teachers express both positive and negative perceptions, valuing parenting as extremely useful for teachers, and devaluing it, as in the aforementioned statement. Caring as parenting can link teachers' different roles as teachers and parents in understanding both of them as caring roles but also creates some tensions with notions of professionalism.

Caring as Mothering

'A caring teacher' is also understood to be a mother-figure teacher, caring associated with mothering and motherly love. This aspect is emphasised by Valerie, and she includes other aspects of caring, such as parenting, giving a cuddle and relatedness:

One of the things I have always thought on teaching is that it is very, very important to love the children, to really love them like they are your own really. I try to treat the children as if I'd treat them when they are my own children. I have a little girl, it's easier for me to do it now. ... that is probably my philosophy, to love the children as if they are mine. I think because I have the little ones it is easier for me because they are more physical, they sit on your knee and you give them a cuddle and in that relationship they can learn. ... But I have taught the younger ones more than the older ones. That's because I am more motherly, I can mother them [laughs].

Some teachers mention that children sometimes call them 'mum', which is interpreted differently:

Wendy: I see it is an ultimate compliment for me when they call me 'mummy', sort of spontaneously but it means that that's the category I am in and they are comfortable with me. It has got to be—with the little ones you are almost like a mum, you have to look after them.

Philip: A number of times I get called 'mum' or 'dad'. It's actually less than my colleagues, I get called mum or dad less than they get called mum, my female colleagues! [*FV:* Why is that?] I don't know. It's probably purely just the fact if somebody is giving care, on the whole the majority of carers tend to be women. So they are used to that, people are not used to see men in that caring role. ... I do think that possibly children would benefit and they would become independent ... in school and they are not going to transfer, 'you are my surrogate mother or father'. You deal with this person who is a professional in a different way to which you deal with your carers at home. I do think you have to make a distinction ... you can't just mother or father them.

Two lines of argument have been found. Some teachers think that being motherly is a positive personal trait for a teacher or feel that being a mother figure is part of teaching young children. Other interviewees expressed their reservations about the term 'caring' because it is associated with mothering, which they perceive as not compatible with professionalism.

Both the definition of caring as mothering and caring as parenting are highly exclusive. In the first place, they exclude men by insisting on the maternal instincts of women, based on a concept of essential motherhood rather than social parenthood. Furthermore, teaching as mothering and as parenting implies that non-parent teachers are lacking professionally relevant experience and skills. The emphasis on parenting by the teachers who are parents can be seen as a strategy to integrate different identities—teacher and parent—into a coherent self. On this individual level the process of integration of different identities is of great value to teaching, as would be the integration of other identities, such as ethnic, working-class, gay and religious identities amongst others. However, the emphasis on parenting for teaching has negative implications on a structural level, as the focus on parenting can be used to exclude people from entering the profession through discrimination. Some male teachers in my research felt that their marital status affects the degree to which they are accepted as primary school teachers.

In the past, discourses of heterosexuality and motherhood and categories of identity such as civic status have been used to recruit or release women teachers, depending on the needs of the job market (Littlewood, 1989; Oram, 1996).

Conclusion

The analysis of teachers' identity discourse suggests that ethic of care is a useful framework to understand teachers' views on the nature of their work. Both women and men employ an ethic of care when reflecting on teaching; gender differences are not found in relation to the importance given to caring in teaching in my sample. The findings of this exploratory study point towards a concept of caring within teaching which does not depend on the teacher's gender, and which recognises that the nature of the work of primary school teachers demands and fosters an ethical orientation towards care.

The research results uncovered a variety of understandings and associations with the term 'caring teacher'. These varied definitions of caring could be conceptualised as a continuum, which reflects aspects of agreement/controversy amongst the responding teachers and inclusiveness/exclusiveness related to gender and other issues of professional identity. The continuum moves from caring as being committed, caring as developing relationships, caring as maintaining physical well-being, to expressing care with a cuddle, caring as parenting and caring as mothering. These definitions range from an exclusive understanding, such as mothering, to the most inclusive—caring as commitment, which embraces all activities a teacher initiates, and can include more specific definitions of caring as well. Whereas most teachers are likely to agree that teachers should care about their relationships with the pupils and generally should show commitment to their work, the more specific definitions of caring, such as caring as physical care, as giving a cuddle, as parenting and as mothering, are supported by only some of the teachers in the sample and rejected by others. The continuum moves from a professional identity as a caring teacher, which is open to interpretation within other identity discourses, to a highly exclusive professional identity as a caring teacher, which is restricted to teachers who are mothers or feel motherly. This continuum is highly linked with femininity at one end and with a less gendered identity at the other.

This research has revealed that caring is seen as an integral part of teaching, but that it is understood in many different ways, linked to a range of associations. Interpretations of caring as mothering, parenting and giving a cuddle are rejected by some teachers because they regard them as undermining teachers' professionalism. In the literature review it has been shown that caring has been conceptualised as highly gendered and as set in opposition to paid work, training and professionalism. It is, in my view, therefore, crucial, when seeking to reclaim caring as an activity of value and necessity, not to perpetuate the discourse of femininity and gender difference. In acknowledging caring as an important aspect of teachers' professional identity, caring should not be defined as an exclusively motherly or parental activity. Defining a caring teacher as committed to teaching and to professional relationships with the pupils would allow one to value this very important aspect of teaching without perpetuating patriarchal discourses which link caring to femininity.

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